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# Living in the future

Gerry Canavan

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*Don't worry, darlin'*

*No baby, don't you fret*

*We're livin' in the future*

*And none of this has happened yet*

*—Bruce Springsteen, 'Living in the Future'*

Exiting theatres with a 94 per cent 'fresh' rating on the review aggregation site Rotten Tomatoes—denoting near-unanimous praise from critics—Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* has been taken alongside Ridley Scott's smash hit *The Martian* (UK/US 2015) to herald the long-awaited return of cerebral sf film to cinemas. In an era in which filmic sf has been utterly dominated by the form of the franchise film—not simply the famous return of the *Star Wars* saga with *The Force Awakens* (Abrams US 2015) and its expansion into anthology films like *Rogue One* (Edwards US 2016), but also the Marvel and DC cinematic

universes, the X-Men franchise, the Star Trek reboots, *The Hunger Games* (2012–15), the return of 1980s and 1990s properties like *Ghostbusters*, *Transformers*, *Mad Max*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Independence Day*, and on and on—*Arrival*'s presentation of an original, self-contained story that does not rely on pre-existing IP and does not lend itself to endless sequelisation or transmedia extension still feels almost shocking, revolutionary. It certainly seemed that way to Hollywood; as the film's screenwriter, Eric Heisserer, has recounted in multiple interviews since the film's release, for many years studios simply did not see *Arrival* as a good financial bet. Indeed, the film was shepherded into existence largely through the sheer force of Heisserer's personal commitment to the project, eventually earning him an executive producing credit; studio executives liked the story it was based on (Ted Chiang's 'Story of Your Life'), and liked Heisserer's pitches, but frequently responded, 'But how is this a *movie*?'—even earning *Arrival* a spot on the so-called 'Black List' in [End Page 491] 2012 for the best unproduced screenplays. But Heisserer stayed at it, and the film ultimately sold to Paramount after a bidding war at Cannes for a record-setting \$20 million (with Amy Adams attached as the star, the actor Heisserer had always seen in the role).

Whether *Arrival* really heralds some new model of production in film sf—or at the very least the return of an older, 'arthouse' sf, à la *2001* (Kubrick UK/US 1968), aimed at adults rather than children and teenagers—very much remains to be seen; the film with which it was frequently paired, the Chris Pratt/Jennifer Lawrence vehicle *Passengers* (Tyldum US 2016), has since proved a flop, while the contemporaneous successes of *Dr. Strange* (Derrickson US 2016) and *Rogue One* (over \$600 million each) and *Black Panther* (Coogler US 2018), *The Last Jedi* (Johnson US 2017) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo brothers US 2018) since then suggest franchise sf is unlikely to disappear anytime soon (to put it very mildly). *Arrival* itself made approximately \$200 million in theatres, albeit of an admittedly austere budget of US\$47 million—making the film a hit, though not a blockbuster. Meanwhile Villeneuve's own follow-up, *Blade Runner 2049* (US/UK/Hungary/Canada 2017), proved a pretty but incoherent mess, and a flop at the box office as well—further suggesting *Arrival*'s ecstatic critical reception may have been a bit premature.

A long-time fan of Ted Chiang's—my only complaint about him is that it takes so *long* for him to craft his nearly perfect short fiction, publishing only 15 stories since 1990—I greeted news of *Arrival* (then still called *Story of Your Life*) with a certain amount of trepidation. Indeed, what is most interesting about *Arrival* for the person who knows (and loves) 'Story of Your Life' is not so much the general success of the presentation but the second-order question of adaptation. 'Story of Your Life' is a story about theoretical linguistics and the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, buttressed by a first-contact-with-alien narrative that slowly transforms over the course of its 56 pages to another sort of story entirely. Until I saw it done, like those bean-counting Hollywood suits, I too would have thought the story was unfilmable—and as a Chiang fan I didn't want them to do it at all unless they were going to do it *right*. What follows, therefore, is a discussion of *Arrival* not simply in its own terms but as a set of interesting and sometimes rather vexing adaptation problems, beginning (by necessity) with a full discussion of the plot that reveals its key twists. The never-ending social panic over spoilers that has been fuelled by Internet culture has long struck me as excessive—and of course *Arrival*'s own presentation metafictionally challenges any kneejerk assumption that knowing how a story ends will ruin your appreciation of it—but in the interest of full disclosure and a [End Page 492] slightly impish spirit of critical perversity I offer a spoiler warning here. If you do not want to know the future, do not read on.

'Story of Your Life' and *Arrival* depict basically identical narrative situations, reordering the presentation slightly in order to suit their respective media forms. In both cases linguist Dr Louise Banks (Amy Adams) is brought in by the military as a consultant when the world is unexpectedly contacted by extraterrestrials. Dr Banks is brought into contact with the aliens (relatively close physical proximity in the film, a sort of galactic Skype-style video chat in the novella) and begins the laborious process of trying to converse not simply with the speaker of another, *unknown* language but with beings who evolved in so radically different a biological context that our foundational assumptions about cognition and communication are unsettled. As the narratives proceed this turns out to be true in a more fundamental way than anyone could have guessed; the aliens (called Heptapods due to their seven-tentacled, octopus-like appearance) turn out to possess nonsequential apprehension of time, meaning that they experience their entire lives simultaneously (not unlike the Tralfamadorians of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*). This is depicted in the story not as some weird superpower but simply an equally valid interpretation of some of the well-known wave-particle duality in quantum physics; mathematically speaking, sequentiality and simultaneity are just two ways to do the maths, each one making some problems easier and some problems harder but neither having epistemic or ontological priority.

What's more, the strongest version of Sapir–Whorf hypothesis—the now largely debunked theory that language structures or even determines the way the brain perceives—turns out to be more radically true than anyone could have guessed: as Dr Banks learns the Heptapod language, she begins to gain some of their powers of apprehension, eventually gaining the ability to see her own future as well. The key emotional locus of this future (especially in the novella, in which the geopolitical stakes of the alien visitation are ratcheted down considerably) is the death of her daughter, who has not even been born yet, but whom Louise now knows will die very young (at 25 in the novella, in a skiing accident; in her late teens in the film, of a rare inherited cancer). The end of both narratives marks the origin of Louise's daughter, and the beginning of the 'story of her life', to which Louise already knows the tragic too-soon **[End Page 493]** ending; echoing the eternal ecstatic 'yes' of Molly Bloom at the end of *Ulysses*, the novella ends on the literal last moments before her conception:

From the beginning I knew my destination, and I chose my route accordingly. But am I working toward an extreme of joy, or of pain? Will I achieve a minimum, or a maximum?

These questions are in my mind when your father asks me, 'Do you want to make a baby?' And I smile and answer, 'Yes', and I unwrap his arms from around me, and we hold hands as we walk inside to make love, to make you.

([Chiang](#) 147)

What starts as a subdued alien invasion story and transitions to a sort of time-travel narrative (without the 'travel') becomes in the end a complex and ambiguous rumination not just on parenting but on suffering and pain—on how we orient ourselves to our memories, especially the sad ones. That Louise's memories happen to be of the future rather than the past is, as with physics, reframed as a question of mere interpretation rather than a necessary or genuinely meaningful distinction; this is especially true as one realises that *any* choice to have a child (barring an unlikely technological or theological miracle) is a choice to bring into existence a being who will someday die. We who have children do not know the whole story of our children's lives before we have them—but we have been around long enough to know the gist of it, and we find ways to live with the fact that we have created a being who will suffer before

they someday die, an event we know will happen but hope at least we ourselves will not be around to witness. Louise did not know all that much more than I did before I had my children, not *really*—just the specifics of the unhappy general facts I know too, but only vaguely, which we both are mostly able to put out of our minds altogether, most of the time.

The above summary of the two narratives, while accurate, is nonetheless somewhat misleading, as 'Story of Your Life' and *Arrival* present this set of circumstances in different ways and with different emphases. In 'Story of Your Life' we have Louise narrating to her daughter in a present tense ('Your father is about to ask me the question' ([Chiang 91](#))) that is quickly revealed to be something other than a standard narrative present; by the second paragraph Louise is already saying that 'when we move out you'll still be too young to remember the house'. By the end of *that* paragraph we have an initially cryptic moment of deferral: 'I'd love to tell you the story of this evening, the night you're conceived, but the right time to do that would be when you're ready to have children of your own, and we'll never get that chance' (91); by the next page, we have progressed far enough in the future that Louise and her husband have divorced and both re-partnered, and Louise has sold the second house 'shortly after your departure', allowing a careful reader to perhaps already guess that this is (at a minimum) a story about a separation Louise expects **[End Page 494]** will be permanent. In any event the secret is not kept for very long; four pages into the story Louise remembers the trip to the morgue where her daughter's body is being kept after the skiing accident. The twist of 'Story of Your Life', then, is not narrative but rather formal in nature: we discover that the present tense and jumbled presentation of these events is not a literary convention but a registration of the way Louise now actually perceives time, after her encounter with the Heptapods and her mastery of their language. What we learn, that is, is that Louise really is experiencing these chronologically distinct moments simultaneously, in a sort of eternal present; for better and worse, she no longer experiences time the way human beings do.

The film, while narratively similar, is quite different. To preserve the same mood of discovery the film chooses to show us the daughter's death in montage at the beginning, followed by the introduction of the alien plot; to the viewer who is not familiar with Chiang's story these events are carefully constructed to seem like Louise's past, not her future. That these flashes of memory are not simply painful reminders of a loss Louise has repressed but flashes of a future that is yet to come is only revealed, to the first-time viewer and non-reader, about two-thirds of the way through the movie, and framed as a major and shocking twist. Likewise, in accordance with a filmic logic of sequentiality over simultaneity—one image after another—the implication of the film version of this story seems to be that Louise is still experiencing her life in order even after coming to understand the Heptapods' way of thinking—just not in standard chronological order. She is able to remember events before they happen, and use that information to her advantage in the present—but there seems to be a progression of experiences, something more like the feeling of being 'unstuck in time' in *Slaughterhouse Five* than the more ethereal eternality of 'Story of Your Life'.

This shift produces in turn a genuine difference in interpretation of what the time travel 'means' within the narrative (one about which Chiang and Heisserer actually found themselves in disagreement): whether or not Louise has the ability to 'make choices' or to alter the future. The film strongly suggests she does: Louise not only leverages her knowledge of the future to solve crises in the present, but she and her husband split up after she reveals to him the truth about their daughter's future (whereas in the novella the people who learn to speak the Heptapods' language never discuss the future with anyone who is not similarly fluent). In the film, the Heptapods themselves have come to Earth to intervene in

their own past—they say they know that in 3,000 years the humans will help their society, and so they have come now to ensure humanity will survive to eventually reach that point—whereas in the novella their actions **[End Page 495]** and the reasoning between them are utterly mysterious and never explained at all. In the novella, Louise's only true 'choice' seems to be the way she orients her internal psychology to life events that are entirely inevitable and unalterable no matter what she does—whereas the film leaves much more room for ambiguity in terms of what Louise can do and might potentially change. This explains, I argue, the key shift in the daughter's cause of death; the movie version of Louise seems like she *could* prevent a skiing accident, so the daughter's death is shifted to an incurable genetic cancer that is inextricable from her existence as such (and thereby the brutal, cruel optimism of bringing a life into the world you know will someday die is excruciatingly heightened). In the novella there is no choice at all: that Louise's bittersweet melancholy comes precisely in being condemned to experience a life that includes both pain and joy, without having any agency as to the precise mixture. The philosophical implications of the story are thus in severe opposition in its two media forms, while superficially being quite similar on the level of plot; Chiang's original story remains in some sense unfilmed and perhaps unfilmable after all.

Other elements of the film remain similarly troubled to the admirer of the original story. While Adams's performance as Louise is quite impressive, the writing of the character is very odd and extremely opaque; we are introduced to her as if she is in mourning, having lost a teenage daughter, only to discover that the character is actually about 20 years younger than we had been led to believe and in fact has 'always' had the flat, disconnected affect we had first attributed to the severity of her grief. Similarly, the film relies implicitly on the notion that Amy Adams will never age, an intriguing deployment of the male gaze and the way Hollywood treats female bodies; one of the reasons the film cuts the Jeremy Renner 'husband' character from the scenes of the future, I suspect, is that we would not accept the visual assertion of a male character's agelessness in the same way. That is, men in Hollywood are allowed to age and grow old, while women simply disappear once they hit 37.

The film also breaks its own narrative logic twice, shattering the superficially impressive spell of its temporal play (especially on a re-watch). First, there is a long 'audiobook' time-skip in the middle of the film that is inexplicably narrated by the Jeremy Renner character, with no diegetic justification whatsoever. Second, and much worse, there is a surreal sequence late in the film in which Amy Adams is suddenly able to speak to the Heptapods telepathically, utterly breaking the linguistic conceit that powers both the film and the novella; at this time the Heptapods conveniently explain the plot of the movie to anyone in the audience who does not yet understand (the whole affair has the strong feel of being a reshoot made to assuage confused test audiences). **[End Page 496]** Ultimately, the film only achieves its bait-and-switch opening via a voiceover from Louise—'I used to think this was the beginning of your story. Memory is a strange thing. It doesn't work like I thought it did. We are so bound by time. By its order'—that actually makes no sense in the context of the larger film; by the time her daughter was born, she already had the Heptapod language and was already unstuck in time. She never had 'our' relationship—a human relationship—to parenting in the first place.

This is of course speculative, but I suspect the most successful aspect of *Arrival* is neither its internal narrative coherence nor its careful sciencefictional logic but rather the powerful affect it produces—a grim structure of feeling that was made all the more powerful by its initial moment of release, three days after the shock election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. In the post-traumatic shock of that moment, as the musical *Hamilton* once put it, the death of America and

the death of the planet, while still entirely prospective, felt so inevitable as to already be a memory; *Arrival* fitted perfectly within a grim mood of horrified premediation that still characterises US culture in the time of Trump. The film's reception seems to be in the end inseverable from that odd moment of terrible precognition: the moment we realised first that the meagre optimism of the Obama era had betrayed us and there was no future after all, and second that knowing what was coming would not make living through it any easier. The melancholic depression of *Arrival*—the eerie sense of being early to a funeral, maybe your own—somehow matches perfectly with the hangover of Trump's shock victory and with everything that has followed since. Two years on, those of us who oppose Trump's agenda still remain locked precisely within November 2016's stomach-twisting moment of terrible emergence, condemned, like Louise, to foresee a horrific disaster that we can neither prevent nor escape, but must find some way to endure. **[End Page 497]**

## Works Cited

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